3 things you (probably) don’t know about crisis communications
What is a crisis?

It’s any unexpected event that can damage an organization’s finances or reputation.

Like a car crash, a crisis can strike at any time and make you feel out of control, the victim of outside forces wreaking havoc in what feels like seconds. That’s truer than ever in the social media age, when any critic is a few keystrokes away from blasting harmful messages about your brand around the world.

The good news is that sound planning, calm management and a clear strategy can help you steer through any crisis. As most crisis communications experts will tell you, a well-crafted response plan, carried out calmly and consistently, will help your organization survive, recover and move forward.

The best crisis communications practitioners don’t merely survive crises; they position their organizations during the crisis to get on the fast track to restoring the organization’s reputation after the crisis.

It’s crucial that you identify your organization’s core values and the stories that demonstrate them—and stay true to those values and stories when you talk about the crisis. The story you tell about your organization in the midst of the storm must be consistent with the story you told beforehand—and that will help you get back on track afterward, no matter how damaging the crisis is.

To prepare yourself, here are three things you may not know about crisis communications:

1. Don’t overlook this vital audience

An organization’s reputation can’t be quantified with a single number, like a politician’s approval rating. Sure, you can conduct survey research and draw useful conclusions from tracking target audiences’ attitudes. But how will those audiences react to negative news?

Think of a large national consumer brand, one whose products or services you buy on a regular basis. Your attitude toward that brand probably sits somewhere between neutral and very positive. Now imagine that a big news story reveals the parent company engaged in unethical behavior. In an instant, your attitude would become significantly more negative, at least for a while.

During a reputational crisis, organizations can’t depend on support from many important stakeholder groups—including customers, shareholders, policymakers and journalists. Some of those...
groups, such as members of the media, have a vested interest in amplifying news about the company’s problems.

Delivering messages to these external stakeholders—and eventually restoring your organization’s reputation in their eyes—is an essential task of crisis communications, but too often crisis communications experts act as if it’s the only one. That’s a big mistake.

Many crisis communicators overlook a crucial stakeholder audience in a crisis: employees.

Internal messaging is a major component of successful crisis comms, because employees are primed to be supportive. The story you tell them from the first hours after the crisis hits until it’s been resolved is the story that many other audiences will hear.

Customers, vendors, suppliers, the local community, journalists all will turn to your employees for the “real scoop” about what’s going on. It’s essential to keep them in the loop, build their confidence and trust, and make sure they are on message.

2. Your crisis team will fall apart without this essential role

One vital element of crisis planning is identifying your crisis comms team. The team may vary depending on the scenario for which you’re planning, but it almost always will include a team leader, an earned media lead, a social media lead, an internal comms lead and a writer. You might also include a subject matter expert (for example, the junior staffer who knows all about cybersecurity issues) and someone who can act as liaison to key stakeholders.

These roles make perfect sense. They form the pillars of a crisis comms team—but without an often-missing role player, the crisis response can implode by Day Two.

More than once I’ve seen an experienced, smart communications team fall apart because they failed to assign an essential role to someone on the team: You need a Traffic Cop.

When a crisis hits, the amount and pace of work triples—or worse. All of a sudden, you’re hit with an explosion of social media traffic, incoming interview requests, demands from top-tier executives for statements and other materials—all while trying to make sense of fast-moving developments in a stressful environment. Even the best comms team isn’t used to ramping up that quickly.

Organizing the traffic flow is crucial. It limits frustration and distractions, helping every member of your comms team stay focused on their tasks: crafting smart messages consistent with your brand
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By Nick Lanyi

voice and values, delivering effective information to key audiences, tracking earned and social media, listening to feedback to inform leaders’ decisions and message development, and handling media requests.

That’s why when I’m called in to an unfolding crisis, a priority is finding a Traffic Cop to stay on top of incoming requests, to-do lists, email chains, document revisions and approvals, and schedules—and to remember what’s been promised to whom down the road, once you’re in recovery mode.

The Traffic Cop can’t be the team leader, who has too many other responsibilities (often including but not limited to camping out in the CEO’s office). It can be a relatively junior staffer, as long as they’re conscientious and smart. You also need someone who can remain organized under pressure and doesn’t mind long hours.

3. The No. 1 trick when vying for CEO support

One prevailing question at the crisis communications workshops I teach is, “How can I get my CEO to invest in crisis comms planning?”

It’s a great question, and not just because you need time and resources for the detail-oriented process required to produce an effective crisis plan. You also need buy-in from the top. Without it, you won’t be able to muster the coordinated effort you’ll need from other parts of your organization—especially your legal team.

Communicators often get pushback from lawyers in a crisis. It’s easy to see why: Your job is to provide stakeholders with more information; their job is to limit the organization’s liability, which often means saying as little as possible. You’re at loggerheads, for good reason. But if they win every battle, the organization could find itself protected legally but badly damaged reputationally.

To resolve this tension, work out arguments about messaging before the crisis hits—during the planning phase—but you won’t get the chance to do so if your CEO isn’t on board.

So how can you get the CEO to support crisis planning? You could demonstrate that peer organizations were hurt by a crisis because they weren’t prepared. That works. You can also get some other top exec to champion the cause. That helps.

The single best way to get buy-in is to put the cart before the horse and organize a crisis simulation before you have a plan.
That’s right: Show the boss how unprepared you are. Sounds risky, but I’ve seen it work, time and again. When the CEO and other leaders are sitting in a table trying to manage an imaginary crisis, and they’re struggling to coordinate basic blocking and tackling, they usually leave the room with a clear, unshakeable desire to invest in a crisis communications plan—pronto.

It’s not as risky as it sounds. When a crisis simulation exposes the company as unprepared, it’s not only because the communications team isn’t ready. The CEO and other leaders will quickly see that the entire organization needs to up its game—and that’s a crucial first step.

Nick Lanyi has spent his career telling stories—and helping clients tell theirs.

He started as a beat reporter on a suburban newspaper, then moved to financial journalism—including several years as executive editor of Louis Rukeyser’s Wall Street, one of the highest-circulation investment letters in history.

A D.C. native, Nick next combined his political savvy and journalism chops as managing director at boutique public affairs firm LMG and as head of public affairs in the D.C. office of global PR agency Porter Novelli. He has led public affairs and crisis communications engagements for many large corporate and nonprofit clients.

As a freelance speechwriter, Nick has written for CEOs, political campaigns and an Oscar-winning actress. His opinion pieces have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post and dozens of other outlets. As a coach and consultant, he’s led media training, crisis communications and writing workshops across the country.

Other than watching the Nats with his wife and two sons, Nick’s favorite thing to do is helping people tell stories more effectively. As he says, everyone’s got some good ones.

At Ragan Consulting Group, Nick Lanyi works with clients on crisis communications, media relations, writing and editing, and brand journalism. Looking for a crisis comms audit, coaching or custom workshop? Contact Nancy Davies to learn more.
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